

Terry McDonagh

MICHEL THE MERMAN

Illustrated by Olaf Hille



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www.olafhille.de
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WHEN a CHILD
IN HAMBURG
WAS ASKED TO SING
IT TOLD a TALE
OF a SEA CHILD.



Much to his parents' delight, Michel's first words, *Hummel...Hummel*, left his heritage in no doubt. From day one, he was bigger and stronger than other boys and he learned to read and write early. Quietly spoken, his size and cleverness gained him the respect of young and old.

Tales of ferocious *Blanke Hans* and the pirate *Stoertebeker* were known to him and he even took home wages on his seventh birthday. His busy life left little time for school. He felt he knew enough and his heart was in filleting large juicy fish. He had a steady hand for a young boy. Michel was Michel.

Hamburg's fishing population drank its beer and spoke of the tiny father and the exceptionally tall boy in huddled whispers. Hanna, his mother, was proud.

"I love my two boys."

"True enough, Frau Meier," her friends would say, or "being huge is not a disadvantage these days...size is not everything and Michel is a fine boy for his age, isn't he."

Time went by and the boy grew and became even stronger. He did have one or two friends from school, but he preferred the company of sailors and the sea. At the age of nine, he built a fishing boat in his spare time.

He'd row the Elbe out to the open North Sea to make his catch – his target often being dogfish. He could be seen cruising up the Elbe to Landungsbruecken with five or six of these fine specimens on tow. Their protests were in vain. Michel knew his line and hooks.

Get into line
ye big wild fish
the knife awaits
and the housewife's dish.

And with that, he'd fling his whole catch on to the pier, where his father and friends waited in eager anticipation.

One Friday afternoon, the boy and his men flung their catch on the filleting table. They were proud of their work. The fish lay side by side, but this time the fish lay poised and waiting:

Michel quietly sharpened his knife. People said later that he'd seemed very composed, and completely unaware of the fate that was to befall him.

Young Michel Meier
had defied the wind
and the face of the sea.

He never heard a sound. As usual, the men stood to one side as the boy raised his knife to separate fish and bone but, this time, it was not to be. One large fish flapped a fin, sprang, bit and spat a potion into the boy's artery. He screamed and dropped his knife. The men stood pale, transfixed and frozen.

Michel's eyes bulged and he felt his head changing shape. He was short of breath and needed water. So did the fish. They rolled and tumbled to the quay just ahead of the panic-stricken Michel.

"Help," was his only word, but it was a confused cry for help.

The fish tumbled into the water like five big splashes and disappeared from sight.

The boy had reached the pier just as his feet were webbing. In an instant, he was in the water and relieved. The men didn't move. The metamorphosis continued until he was half-boy, half-fish and about one metre in length.

Thus began the legend of Michel the Merman.



Lonely and in despair, he screamed:
 I'm trapped between fish and flesh,
 Locked into the water I have loved.
 An outcast, I hurtle through the deep,
 deepening darkness.
 There was nobody to hear him.

Michel struggled to come to terms with his new self. He had no legs or arms, suffered from loss of appetite and he missed his parents and the little family home in Altona.

And just then, as he'd nonchalantly begun sifting through floating seaweed, he thought he heard weird and wonderful music. He stopped and was immediately encircled by a shoal of sparkling white fish. They seemed to sing as they swam.

They beckoned him to accompany them and he fell into their power, almost hypnotized. He was whisked along, deep into sinister waters where the Elbe meets the North Sea – into to the Kingdom of the fearful, *Blanke Hans*.

Could this possibly be the same *Blanke Hans* that had churned up the North Sea and driven its unbridled waves to smash the dykes and level fishing villages up and down the coast?

Spellbound, Michel was escorted into regions he had never dreamed of, let alone seen. He trembled as they drove deeper through a corridor of light. The corridor opened out into a glowing space where *Blanke Hans* was seated on his watery throne. The sheer splendour overshadowed anything he had ever experienced.

Michel was beckoned to and escorted through rows of fish. *Blanke Hans* appeared to be neither fish nor flesh. He was translucent, grey to black in colour with large nondescript eyes, but he filled the water with his wonderful energy.

In a surprisingly gentle voice, he said:

Come into the light.
Your repentance
has set you free
to move through the ages
of man and fish.

In that instant the court faded and Michel lay happily between the waves. He knew he was free to move back through death, deep into dreams and forward into life.

He wondered when they would meet again.

7

For the first time since he had left the pier at Landungsbruecken, Michel began to feel hunger pangs. He swam to and fro gazing at swimming food, but he was not quite sure of how he should attack. He hadn't got used to the fact that he could use his mouth to catch seaweed.

Seeing a particularly tasty looking weed, he opened his mouth, threw caution to the breeze and darted. The fish never felt a thing. Michel swallowed, nodded and concluded that food had never tasted so good. He dived again and after four or five succulent morsels, he felt restored.

Now feeling much better, he began to consider taking a trip up the Elbe to visit his beloved Hamburg. He wondered what his mother could think of him as a merman. She used to be so fussy about appearance. He surfaced and looked about him:

Here the air trembles
like a great string
and the waves slap and chatter
like sailors home on leave.

8

The young merman enjoyed his new sense of freedom. He'd slice through the water like a knife through butter, bask just below the surface or simply frolic about.

As you can imagine, it took some time to begin to understand and decode the language of the deep. Its sounds were foreign to his ear, but the more carefully he listened, the more easily he understood.





Now in command of both the language of the water and that of the land, he felt the North Sea unfold its deepest secrets.

I spring
into whistling winds
and glide
through untold mysteries.

9

Every man, woman and child in Hamburg had heard of the North Sea islands Sylt, Foehr, Amrum and, of course, the little islands, called Halligs. Michel was no exception. The ferocious winds, the dikes and the *wattenmeer** were part of the small-talk of the people of Altona.

On one carefree afternoon, Michel was out on the sea, thinking of exotic places he had never seen – he was hungry for adventure. Nearing the mouth of the Elbe, he felt a compulsive urge to swim north. The winds began to howl and he was tossed about like paper in a storm.

Frantically, he sprang high, only to be gobbled up by mighty mountains of water. He shot clean out of the water and almost froze in disbelief. Less than an oar's length to his left, a Tall Ship was breaking up in the storm. He remembered the cries for help as the ship sank out of sight. He felt sick. Recovering his senses, he dived and dived, but found no trace of the phantom ship.

Great dreams
in mighty ships
are strewn
forever
on the ocean's bed.

10

Time went by and the world of fish and marine life continued to fascinate him but he had no concept of time, as we see it. Even his fins were coming along nicely.

One day after a particularly tasty lunch, he began to feel an irresistible urge to visit home. He hesitated briefly but within seconds, he was on his way.

Swimming deep under boats and barges, he covered the distance in no time. For once, he felt strange as he sprang out of the water and on to the pier.

*mud flats

“This is a weird feeling,” he muttered. And he was met by an even greater shock – his mother was there to meet him.

She was in tears, dressed in black and holding a little boy’s hand. Their eyes met for the first time since he had left and her expression said everything: his father had died and the little boy was his brother.

Without as much as a word, Michel turned away to hide his grief and headed and headed up river to open sea. He knew, as did they, that his father had slowly pined away after his departure.

Hanna and her little boy stood hand-in-hand staring upriver in the direction of the North Sea. She knew he would attend his father’s funeral, just as she had known that he would visit.

I will go
down
to the sea’s bed
and bury my tears.

11

Michel went down to the sea bed for comfort and, in wild fits of loneliness and despair, he sped up along the coastline. He swam recklessly. A thud was the last thing he remembered. Then he thought he heard human voices.

His head ached and his mouth was dry. He heard voices again. Shaking himself, he realized he had been cast ashore on a Hallig. The voices seemed to come closer. He crawled in a most ridiculous fashion, using fin and arm to crawl behind a large plant. The voices came even closer.

A man, tall and elegant as a storyteller, was leading the group. They stopped by what appeared to be a lone gravestone and he began to tell a tale. Michel found himself beside a little crumbling church. He knew he couldn’t remain much longer out of water, but he was fascinated by the story the man began to tell of Freya, a beautiful girl with long flowing auburn hair, who had walked out through the waves at high tide.

She was later seen astride a white seal, under a full moon. Her parents had erected a gravestone to her memory. The group moved away. Sliding back into the water, Michel felt certain this girl would play a role in his future. How and why he did not know.



12

I will mourn
my father
and afterwards
follow my heart
with a handful
of daydreams
in the full moon.

13

Michel, true to his word, was back in Altona for his father's funeral. He watched, from a distance, as the tiny cortege, led by his mother, stopped for some time at the fish factory where he and his father had worked. His mother's glance fell on the river. Their eyes met and then rested on the hearse.

When respects had been paid, the group set off on foot, to follow the remains along the wind-swept road to Suellberg. He was to be buried in a place of honour, reserved for fishermen, on a slope overlooking their beloved Elbe. Michel accompanied the slow-moving funeral along its route by the river.

Only Hanna was aware of Michel's presence and she kept it to herself. People remarked that she had been strangely at peace on that day, despite her tragic loss.



The long trek over and the remains laid to rest, the mourners withdrew to a *Kneipe* on the waterfront. Hanna, with her child in her arms, stayed back and was seen to gaze for a time onto the river. Mother and son, Michel, were united and felt at peace. They knew they would often meet here, as a family.

She waved Michel goodbye and went to join the others. Michel gazed at the slope for a time.

I shall always come
to this place
when bad weather tosses me
and calm days quiet me,
to be at home.

With these words Michel turned into the river.

14

Hamburg is, and always has been, a trading city. The Hansestadt Hamburg played a central role in what was known as the Hanseatic League. These people bought and sold, transporting their wares in great ships on the high seas. They brought silk from China, spices from India, or furs from Nowgorod. They became rich and influential and formed a base upon which the Hanseatic people of today have been able to build.

Round the cosy hearths
in Altona
we inhaled the mystery
of tall ships on lonely water
and forgave pirates.

Michel didn't know much history and had less interest in it, but he did know of *Stoertebeker* and the legends of his plundering on the high seas and that his favourite targets had been the ships of the Hanseaten. But for all his plundering, he had been a good man who gave to the poor, it was said.

Where fact ends and fiction begins can be sometimes be uncertain but the story goes that one day Michel felt a strong urge to go back into past time – into history. He had begun to feel a hunger for adventure but he could not have known, at this point, that this trip would change his life, in a very dramatic manner.

Michel was confused. He wanted to go on his adventure, but nothing was happening. His mind was going in all directions and then like a bolt out of the blue, he felt himself being catapulted through the waves. All sense of time and distance were lost to him. Then it was still.

He looked around and saw land and, to his surprise, people: a small tubby man was chasing a tall, slim girl along a beach and shouting, *give me back my fish* or something to that effect.

In truth, he could only guess what they were saying, as they seemed to be speaking a strange language. The man had a long red beard and was dressed in strange costume like a mad actor on holidays. She also wore weird things like skins, but she could run and he couldn't; at least, not very well.

Every few seconds, she'd turn and stick out her tongue. His voice became weaker as his panting became louder. Then they disappeared behind rocks.

Michel remembered an old ballad from his school days and he, instinctively, knew he was re-living it:

A little old man
went to fish one day
when a damsel fair
chanced that way.
She had long black hair
and eyes of coal
and she stole fish in ones
and sometimes a shoal.
He flung a large one
onto the strand
and she grabbed that fish
and headed inland.
He followed her wildly
over the rocks
but he gave up the chase
because of holes in his socks.



By now, Michel was aware of his special gift. He could go back into time or forward into the future, by simply concentrating hard enough on his wishes. He was dying to meet *Stoertebeker*.

He closed his eyes, concentrated and was off again. This time he was in a dense fog. He saw a pirate ship, with bulging canvas and enormous masts bearing down at full speed on a somewhat slower trading ship. If Michel had had a human spine, he would have felt shivers run down it.

Old *Stoertebeker* whipped his men into fury with drawn cutlass and foul tongue. He stood there looking magnificent on the prow of his mighty ship. What could have driven this good man to such rage?

The cannons roared and the two ships drew closer. Michel shuddered. The merchant ship sought to escape, but it had no chance. The pirates pulled alongside the vessel and flung their grappling irons across. They bit into the timbers and dragged the ships together. Men tumbled overboard like refuse. One could hear the roars of *Stoertebeker* above the howling winds and groaning planks.

Then Michel thought he heard a faint female voice calling, but he told himself not to be ridiculous. It came again and he felt certain he was listening to the cries of Freya, the girl from the tale he had heard on the *Hallig*. He pushed her cries to the back of his mind. He couldn't bear to listen.

In a short time all was still again. The pirates boarded the merchant ship – sailors that resisted were flung to the deep. The beautiful girl with long auburn hair was safely in the hands of the pirates; Michel was happy and relieved to return to real time.

He breathed a sigh of relief and tried to forget the whole episode. He lay down for the night and was almost asleep when he thought he heard that voice again. He slept badly.

Michel woke abruptly. He was back on the high seas with *Stoertebeker* and again and again he kept hearing the voice. Perhaps she'd been kidnapped by the pirate? "But *Stoertebeker* is a good man," he told himself.

In Altona, they'd certainly have an explanation but out here and alone, he felt lost. He thought hard and long. He saw pirates, heard voices, and Freya! What had become of that mysterious young woman?

He was getting nowhere. He grabbed a quick lunch, nodded off, and woke up with an idea: he'd call on the help of *Blanke Hans*.

When Michel woke
water felt like a fairytale.
And he could hear singing.

18

Blanke Hans surrounded himself with his court, as before, but this time he asked Michel to come and sit next to him. Michel was proud. *Blanke Hans* smiled gently and with a gesture, dismissed his court. They were alone. If he'd had palms, they'd have been sweating. Hans leaned forward and began softly:



Out of your deep sleep
you have called me
into your dark hour.

Michel blurted out his story in great gushes. He told of his father's death, of the pirates and, of course, of that woman's voice.

Hans replied:

In the name of the sea
I embrace you.
You will sing,
beam
and find rhythm.

It was obvious from Michel's face that he'd no idea what this statement meant. Hans smiled and assured him that all would become clear and they would be meeting again in the not-too-distant future and then, he was gone.

There must be
a lot of wondering
before
getting past questions.

The next hours and days were quiet. It was a time to take stock; to take a hard look at himself and all that was happening. In the end, he decided the only reasonable thing to do was to take things as they came. He felt happy.

19

Now Michel had always liked company, but it wasn't easy for him to get to know his new underwater friends. He had a nodding acquaintance with a few fine and beautiful fish, but that was about it.

But it was to his credit that a number of dogfish had recently begun to show signs of forgiveness. He had often and openly expressed his repentance for his lack of sensitivity during his human days.

But just at that moment, he wasn't really in the mood for talk, so he wandered around avoiding fish or simply nodding.

And then, he felt his attention being drawn to something on his far left. He chose to ignore it. There it was again! It was getting on his nerves. He glanced,

glanced away, glanced again, closed his eyes, opened them, but the young woman with long auburn hair would not go away. She was astride a white seal.

He felt an intake
of breath and
a promise began
in his heart.

20

Naturally, he pretended not to see her. He drifted in circles, as if he'd seen nothing. But his heart was thumping with happiness. She didn't swim away. She seemed to be casually drifting; her seal quietly feeding at a distance.

Great crowds of fish were gathering in the shadows. They were beginning to sense something. Michel swam closer. Freya swam closer. They exchanged glances, looked deeper into each other's eyes and saw their destiny. Their fins touched.

A string was plucked.
They heard it
in a single heartbeat
and went down together
out of reach.

21

Freya could not get enough of Michel's story of his visit to her Hallig. She made him repeat it again and again and was very moved by his telling. Then her eyes dropped. She went on: "I just knew I had to do it; I had to leave dry land forever."

He nodded. She had always loved water, she said, and could swim for long periods underwater, even as a child. She explained that she had seen a white seal day after day frolicking out on the bay, and that it had seemed to calling her. She told him of the irresistible pull she had felt towards the seal and the open sea:

"Letting go I swam and swam with wonderful ease with the seal at my side." It had looked so exotic in its white coat that she had called it Magic.

On one of those evenings, she'd swum ashore and was about to stand up, when she noticed her fins. With a heavy heart she turned her back on her



childhood, her family and everything that had been her human past and headed for deep water.

She would ride Magic
her destiny
forever
under a full moon.

22

Freya and Michel were sometimes seen by fishermen and late travellers on moonlit nights and wondrous stories were told round the North Sea and Frisian Islands, deep under the waves, and up as far as Hamburg.

Hanna heard the stories, as indeed did Freya's parents and they were overjoyed.

Hanna raced through the winding narrow streets to tell the tall athletic water-bearer of her wonderful news.

Candles light one by one
and whisper mysteries
to passing children
who sing them
and tell them
to the wind.
The wind touches
sleeping children
and their parents
watch them smile.

23

There was so much to tell, so many unanswered questions, but they had lots of time. They decided not to visit their families until they had really got to know each other and made plans for the future.

Michel just could not get used to Freya's long auburn hair and she adored his cheeky smile.

During the day, they'd wander the deep or explore new beauty spots. They seldom went on land. At night, they'd lie on the sea surface, weather permitting,

and enjoy their canopy of light. Magic was never far away.
Stars seldom went out.

24

Let's visit your monument," suggested Michel one morning after breakfast.

Freya pondered.

"Why not, but it makes me sad when I think of it, because I remember my family and long to be with them."

My little Freya
is very sad
and that is very bad.

"I made that up myself... it's a wonderful poem, isn't it!" They laughed and joked and he assured her he'd be a hero.

"Don't get too sure of yourself, young man...there are lots of other fish in the sea."

And off they swam, frolicking and giggling with Magic in close pursuit.

On the *Hallig*, they sat by the stone that bore but one word:

FREYA

"They knew you weren't lost."

"I know."

They were quiet knowing what the other was thinking – ready for *Blanke Hans* to formally unite them. It would be a happy occasion.

A kind of gift
hung about them
as they swam
deep
into days of silence.

25

Michel had never told Freya of his encounter with *Stoertebeker* and his pirate crew.

He felt he had to go back again to that first time he'd heard Freya's voice. He was restless and slightly worried; about what he wasn't really sure.

He wanted to meet her in the far, distant past before he could settle fully in the present.

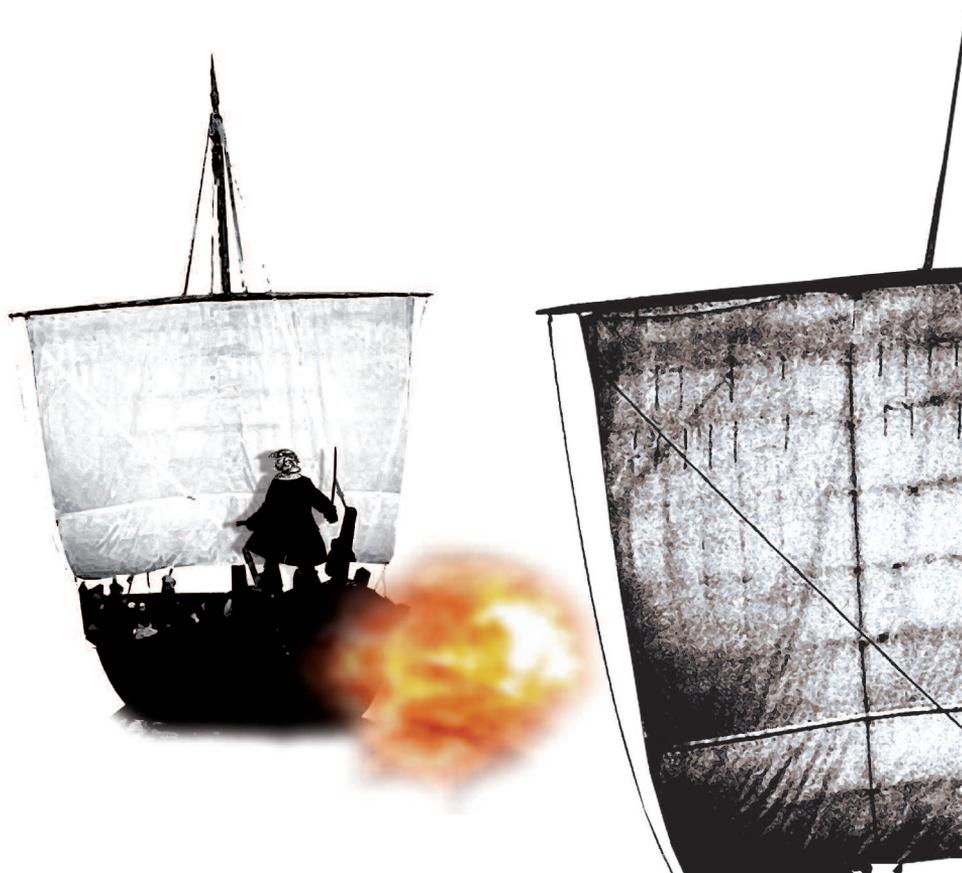
He told her he'd got something to do and that he wouldn't be long. A question was about to form itself on her lips, but she thought otherwise and turned away. She didn't want him to see her suspicion.

For the first time in ages Michel was alone, and not liking it one little bit. He wanted to turn back, but no, he had to get to the bottom of that female voice. Lately he'd been thinking of it more and more. Was he just being neurotic? Time would tell.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated and, in a jiffy, he was in the midst of it all again. This time, however, he watched it from another angle and from before the actual fighting had begun.

He could hear excited voices coming out of the fog. They were coming from the merchant ship. He drew closer. They seemed to be dragging in a net and all standing round their catch. *Help... help me!* a voice from the net pierced the fathoms. It was a young woman's voice. Michel heard another voice: *Perhaps we could sell her to a circus.*

She screamed as if in the throes of death. Michel's nagging suspicion had become reality. He knew that voice; it was Freya's. It called again, "help... please help. I need water."



Michel was now certain that he was listening to Freya and he knew they could move back and forward in time.

A great cannon roared out of the fog. *Stoertebeker!* The merchants yelled and dropped their catch on deck. The great man's powerful ship came into view with blazing guns. A boat was being lowered. *Stoertebeker* howled like an angry whale and his men fired again and again.

They forced their way on board, grabbed the victim and brought her to a safe place in the company of the pirates. The wind screamed and the timbers creaked as that ship was plundered. It sank with a groan.

Michel breathed a deep sigh of relief. He knew Freya was in safe hands. Even he hadn't been present they'd have taken care of her. He followed the ship for a time springing high into the air to draw attention to himself. "Look, another one of them," a deck hand called out.

Again a boat was lowered and *Stoertebeker* spoke to Michel, in person. When he heard Michel's story he was visibly moved and called for Freya to be brought to him.

The pirates turned away respectfully and looked out to sea, but the intensity of this moment was something they would remember for the rest of their lives.

Later, the couple informed *Stoertebeker* of their wedding plans and invited him. He couldn't come as he belonged to a different age and had no time to go shopping, but he would love to see them on their honeymoon.

Afterwards when Michel asked Freya why she had not told him of this incident, she said, she had intended telling him, at some suitable moment, but somehow that moment had not presented itself. With a twinkle she continued: "It is not always advisable to poke too deeply into a young woman's past."

Michel knew there were many things he would never understand about this young woman. He wouldn't even bother to try. Instead, he snuggled up to her.

The time for the wedding did come round and word spread above and below the waves. *Blanke Hans* was to perform the ceremony and afterwards, they would retire to Freya's Hallig with their loved ones. At a later date they would get together close to the fishermen's churchyard in *Suelldorf*.

Michel and Freya dived deep at the junction where the Elbe meets the North Sea, and there to meet them was *Blanke Hans*, now, in magnificent attire, surrounded by his singing florescent court. They were escorted through a great

tunnel of fish into a clearing in front of the throne. Attendants draped them in seaweed and then tied the loose ends together.

They swam in unison
in the company of
a humming sea.

Up above, birds gathered to form a circle of colourful feathers and their families in boats shed a silent tear.

Blanke Hans called on the powers of the sea and air to ratify their union. In a great shudder they responded. The ceremony was completed, the court dispersed and they shot to the surface into the prepared circle.

Their families were formally introduced and Magic let the boats to Freya's Hallig.

They were to celebrate with their families for the first time since their leaving. Freya's family were ecstatic. Hanna was elated. Michel and his little brother quickly got used to each other. They all loved her monument.

Later that afternoon, Michel took his mother down to the water's edge and questioned her about the tall man in black. He had known him as the water-bearer in Altona. Hanna shyly showed him her wedding ring and her eyes told the rest. She beckoned to her husband, her little son, Hein, and Freya. They all held hands and fins.

In the fullness of time, the happy couple took their leave into the moonlight, leaving land and people, but having forever bound the Elbe, the North Sea and their people in an irrevocable bond.

